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ABSTRACT

A composition teacher incorporated film into her literature classes with the hope of drawing on her students' familiarity with this medium to promote their interest in reading as well as developing their reading and writing skills, but she found several problems in implementing this plan. She found that the simple instructions, "Read the story" and "Watch for differences between the film and story versions," did little to engage the students. There was considerably more student input in discussions and longer and better written essays when she guided the reading and viewing of the story with specific writing assignments designed to elucidate specific points of interpretation which may be called into service when discussion falters. The composition teacher also noticed that students responded better when she went over the assignments in class instead of handing them out at the end of class. The techniques are illustrated with an extended account of the assignments and class activities surrounding one particular short story. (Two class handouts describing the writing assignments are included.) (RS)

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"Is a Picture Really Worth a Thousand Words?"

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"IS A PICTURE REALLY WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS?"

Rationale

If a picture is worth a thousand words, why was my use of film in a Composition II/Literature classroom yielding me twenty-five words or less? I always felt that our technologically-oriented society was producing highly visually-oriented students. Statistics indeed indicated that students spent long hours passively watching television and movies and video cassettes. Furthermore, with the advent of MTV and music videos, even what were once pure listening habits had become visually dependent. I knew this reliance on and preference for being fed visual interpretations implied that getting students to read, understand and appreciate the written word would be a challenge. Rather than fighting the incoming tide of visual inputs, I thought I might better serve my students by going with the flow and incorporating film into literature classes, hopefully drawing on their familiarity with this medium to promote their interest in reading as well as developing their reading and writing skills.

Armed with this theory, I charged ahead and started including films of short stories in my Composition II/Literature class, feeling quite self-satisfied with my state-of-the-art approach. Then I learned my good intentions were not enough. I once thought just saying "Read the story and be prepared to discuss it in class" would suffice. But the ensuing class discussions were as bare-boned as my directions. Likewise, before viewing a film version of the same story, I figured saying "Pay close attention

to how this story is presented in film" would generate interesting commentary and insightful follow-up essays. Again, meatless results. It was frustrating to see my attempts to use film, their preferred modality, go for naught. What was wrong with these students, I questioned. Didn't they care? Why weren't they trying? It took a while, but I finally realized the problems were not so much with imperceptive students as they were with the imperceptive teacher who failed to see the importance behind assignment-making. I have since learned how to better prepare students for reading, discussing, and then critically viewing a film presentation of a story. My more explicit directions have yielded more thoughtful reactions to the material in class discussion, a more analytical viewing of the film, and much more concrete and substantial writing about the film.

Process

A particularly successful scenario for using film in a composition/literature class is to assign and then guide the reading of a story, follow with class discussion, generate a pre-film viewing writing assignment, view the film, and close with a post-viewing discussion and writing assignment. The PBS series "The American Short Story" is ideally suited for this approach. The film versions of the stories are well-presented. Obviously pains were taken both to enlist talented actors and to seek out perceptive screenwriters to convert the written word to the film medium. Although I've used many of these films and have been pleased with the results, a particular favorite of mine and the

students has been Willa Cather's "Paul's Case." Each time I work with this story, I learn more about how to teach it in such a way that the students first grasp Cather's thoughts and then consider whether any of her ideas have been altered or sacrificed in the process of going from the written word to film.

Making the Reading Assignment

Merely assigning the reading of "Paul's Case" for class discussion generated inconsistent results: sometimes the whole class responded beautifully, more often only a few perceptive students carried the discussion, and too frequently, my questions received only puzzled looks. It made me cringe to think of the richness of the story which was eluding the class. Although the thought of directing their reading disturbed me philosophically--I might not be allowing students to discover and appreciate and develop interpretations on their own--I found that suggesting motifs students might trace or questions they might keep in mind while reading helps them to read analytically and to pick up on sub-themes they might otherwise overlook. Now when I assign the reading of "Paul's Case," I provide a hand-out which indicates what the students might look for. Questions which focus on content are followed by questions dealing with analysis and interpretation. In addition, I suggest students trace and underline a few themes and try to make a general statement about the theme or motif's importance. Underlining themes also helps readers maintain focus throughout the story, forcing them to read as carefully at story's end as at the always well-intentioned outset. Hand-Out A, which follows, is a typical reading guide for "Paul's Case."

Reading Guide--"Paul's Case"

As you read the story, find the answers to these questions. Please take notes on this sheet and bring it to class for discussion. Underline any language you might find relating to Paul's thirst or feverish behavior, water, and flowers.

1. How do we know Paul is different? What specifically sets him apart from peers, authority figures and his father?

2. Is Paul meant to represent a stereotype?

3. How do Paul's various lives differ (home, school, theatre)? Underline or note language describing these places.

4. What kind of life is Paul supposed to lead? Why can't he?

5. Is Paul a true devotée of the arts?

6. What forces close in on Paul in New Jersey?

7. What do you think Paul should do at this point?

8. What does Paul want?

9. Compare the language describing the storms in Pittsburgh and in New York.

10. Why is the college boy brought in? What does his encounter with Paul show?

11. Does Paul fit in in New York?

12. What forces close in on Paul in New York?

13. What do you think Paul should do at this point?

14. Why does Paul take his life?

15. How do the underlined themes fit in with the story? What is the significance of each of these themes?

Hand-Out A

The seriousness and importance of the reading guide is communicated nonverbally by my behavior toward it. I've learned not to just distribute it at the end of class--doing that is as effective as saying "Read the questions at the end of the story." Instead, I read the questions aloud, expand on some of the material, and ask students to record some answers as they read, emphasizing that their input now is crucial to the rest of the assignment. If the students follow these reading guides, and for the most part mine do, they are well-prepared for the class discussion and therefore much more eager to participate.

Class Discussion

When the class meets to discuss "Paul's Case," the reading guide questions are addressed. Additionally, and to prevent against too-mechanical an approach, I pose supplemental questions. I might begin by asking whether or not the students liked the story and why, or whether or not they could relate to Paul and his problems. Encouraging the class to see that they, too, must deal with the same problems as Paul helps establish relevance and promote interest. Asking what the title might mean is also a productive question. At appropriate times I am likely to insert questions about the significance of the pictures and tapestry over Paul's bed. As the discussion develops, should students rush to defend Paul, I take on the role of devil's advocate and argue that he is a shallow, lazy bum, that we all have our "have to's." If Paul does not receive support, I'll argue that no one understands him, that society and authority are just too confining and cannot

tolerate someone who deviates from the norm. Taking either tack helps the students to see that Paul's dilemma is not cut-and-dried, that ambiguities always prevail. If the class discussion is being carried by only a few students, I usually divide the class into small groups and assign a question that requires a collaborative effort and consensus opinion. This approach encourages the more timid students to participate. Asking what escapes Paul makes or whether or not suicide is his only alternative usually works well, as does asking if Paul's death reflects whether Cather is being sympathetic toward him or merely punishing him. Before the discussion is concluded, we also try to establish the metaphoric significance of sub-themes, Paul's relationship to and implied comparison with flowers for instance, and note how these motifs enrich the story with layers of meaning.

When it becomes clear to the class that Cather's story is highly interpretive rather than purely escapist, when they begin to appreciate that "Paul's Case" is abundantly rich and complex, it is time to lay the ground work for the film viewing and the writing assignment which precedes it.

Pre-Film Viewing Discussion and Writing Assignment

The least effective approach to the use of the "Paul's Case" film is to merely announce that it will be shown during the next class and suggest students watch for differences between the print and film presentations. This instruction is not specific enough: students do not have a focus and usually end up viewing passively and superficially. Just as we helped guide the reading and direct

the discussion, we should also steer the film viewing. This can be done orally by asking the student what parts of the story might lend themselves well to film, as well as what might be difficult to portray. The problem point-of-view might pose is considered. Getting the students to begin thinking about some of the difficulties which must be overcome to translate the story to film creates a curiosity about the film. The writing assignment about to be described goes further.

I have found it useful in every class to commit my writing assignment instructions to paper. This makes me clarify what I'm looking for and helps to redirect the students once they have left the class and have forgotten just what it was they were asked to do. Again, if I do not give careful treatment to this hand out, it will be regarded as a throw-away by the class. Consequently, I avoid distributing the writing assignment at the last minute, introducing it instead during class, allowing ample time for explanations and questions. A sample set of instructions, Hand-out B, follows.

This assignment sheet asks students to select ideas they feel are key to the story's understanding, assume the screenwriter's role, and then suggest how they would convey these ideas in film. I specify that the ideas selected must not be limited to descriptive passages in order to avoid eliciting suggestions that Paul's room be portrayed word-for-word as Cather described it. I want the students to struggle with the handling of the flower motif or the presentations of Paul's feelings of alienation for instance. This

Writing Assignments--"Paul's Case"

Part I, 1-2 pages, typed, due _____

Select three ideas you feel are most important to the understanding of "Paul's Case." Describe or explain why these ideas are important and how you feel they could best be presented on film. The scenes or ideas you select do not necessarily have to involve action or dialogue; they should identify elements that you feel are key to the interpretation or understanding of the story. Please work with no more than one idea handling physical description.

This part of the assignment must be submitted before you view the film. Keep a copy of your work for your later reference.

Part II, 2-4 pages, typed, due _____

Discuss how (and whether) your three ideas were handled in the film. Draw a conclusion which evaluates the effectiveness of the filmed version of your ideas in particular and of the story in general. You might consider what was gained or lost in moving from one medium to the other.

assignment serves a two-fold function: by grappling with the problems posed by transferring a written idea to film, the students begin to appreciate the complexity, advantages and limitations of each medium; additionally, after they've created their own scenes, they are anxious to see how and whether the ideas they selected are treated in the film. Their vested interest creates a vantage point from which to view "Paul's Case."

Because the follow-up writing assignment is also included on the hand-out, the viewing purpose is even more clearly focused.

Viewing the Film

Pains have been taken so far to plan the reading, writing and viewing assignments. The same concern must also be taken with the screening of the film. Just as the careful introduction on the hand-outs nonverbally reflected their importance, the handling of the film establishes the mood with which it will be received. The optimal situation is to reserve a room specifically designed for film viewing to show "Paul's Case." (For this idea, I am indebted to my colleague, Priscilla Bellairs.) Moving the film out of the classroom nonverbally conveys that seeing "Paul's Case" is special. In addition, a darkened viewing room rivets focus on the screen, while a typical classroom's lighting and size tend to discourage focus, spread viewers out too much, and encourage distractions. A film-viewing room has an atmosphere of seriousness and purpose about it which cues appropriate behavior, much the same as a movie theatre does. If the film must be shown in a regular classroom, it is important to try to minimize distracting elements

beforehand and pull desks closely together to replicate, as closely as possible, the feeling of a screening room. Students should be encouraged to take notes as they watch. I have found that the idea of viewing with pen and paper in hand is outside many students' experience.

Post Viewing Discussion and Final Writing Assignment

The class meeting which follows the viewing of "Paul's Case" provides closure: the reading, writing and viewing all come together. The students are usually eager to share their reactions to the film, and their writing assignment gives them specifics to discuss. If the discussion gets vague and reduces to an "I liked it" or "I thought it was boring" level, specific questions can be used to generate more analysis. I might ask what was different on film or whether the character portrayals met their expectations or whether they felt the essence of Cather's story was faithfully rendered. Asking for reactions to the ending always evokes interesting responses. I discourage the often-voiced and mistaken attitude that the film is gospel, that somehow the screenwriter had the only true insight into the story, and that this representation is the "right" one. This helps students feel more confident about their own ideas, enabling them to compare treatments rather than assume their own interpretations were somehow wrong.

After the film has been discussed, the second part of the writing assignment is addressed. I try to make it clear to the students that besides considering the treatment of their key ideas, they are to focus their writing on the effectiveness of each

medium, not on which medium they prefer. Allowing latitude for the latter has sometimes reduced content to "I prefer the film because I don't like to read." Because of the attention paid to assignment-making throughout the lesson, students are by now well-enough supplied with specific notes and ideas to generate thoughtful written analyses. The results are usually mutually rewarding.

Conclusion

We can take advantage of students' preference for the film medium to kindle a desire to read and to act as a catalyst for writing in a literature/composition class. The results can be gratifying when every part of the lesson has been carefully coordinated: a haphazard approach can be as frustrating to students as to the well-intentioned teacher. When their reading and viewing is unfocused, students frequently butterfly from idea to idea and feel overwhelmed when they must come to terms with the whole in writing. Their initial fears about the written word and discomfort with it intensify. While students are more familiar with watching than reading, this does not imply their viewing skills are sharply honed. With proper direction, students can learn to read, view, and think more critically as well as appreciate some of the advantages and disadvantages of each medium. I have seen students take more of an interest in reading when they see for themselves what can be lost in passively watching and accepting someone else's film interpretations. Another end result is evident in the more substantial writing they produce. Sometimes even more than a thousand words.